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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000637

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SUBJECT: ALBANIA'S NEW FOREIGN MINISTER

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS II FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)
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¶1. (C) Summary: As Albania's new Foreign Minister, Movement for Socialist Integration (LSI) Chairman Ilir Meta will likely contrast sharply both in style and substance with the former FM Lulzim Basha, who now serves as Minister of the Interior. Meta previously served as Prime Minister and FM, and has an extensive background in foreign affairs. He can be combative at times - he once physically tackled an MP in parliament during a speech - and his mannerisms are abrupt and in sharp contrast with the smooth, sophisticated boyish charm that former FM Basha displayed. Meta is a shrewd and dogged political tactician who will pursue his own agenda as much or more than that of Prime Minister Berisha. He will likely use his time as FM to rebuild his own political fortunes as well as those of his LSI party in hopes of one day becoming PM again. Meta's first priorities are likely to be EU integration, primarily visa liberalization, and strengthening Albania's regional cooperation. Overall, the direction of the Foreign Ministry will likely change little, and U.S.-Albanian relations are expected to continue to deepen and flourish. End summary.

What We Can Expect From Meta as FM

¶2. (C) During his previous time as Foreign Minister (July 2002 to July 2003), Meta was seen as a pragmatist in terms of policy, and a good manager within the Ministry. One of Meta's final acts as FM was to push through civil service reforms that increased salaries and made the MFA a more professional ministry. Most Embassy contacts within the MFA appear relieved to have Meta back as FM, both because Meta is seen from within the Ministry as an above average FM, and because outgoing FM Basha was widely seen as a poor manager.

¶3. (C) Yet despite repeated assurances from Meta and Berisha that they will work together as a team, tensions and conflict are inevitable. Whereas Lulzim Basha was a loyal Democratic Party servant of the PM, Meta comes to the MFA with his own agenda - to rebuild his own political fortunes as well as those of his LSI Party. Meta will likely exercise much more independence as FM than Basha, and will probably not hesitate to tell international partners when, where and how he disagrees with the PM. Whereas Lulzim Basha could be counted upon to be the charming face of Berisha's foreign policy, Meta will likely serve a much different role. Nevertheless, in terms of foreign policy, Albania's goals under Meta will remain the same: EU integration; strong ties with the U.S., and stronger relations with Albania's neighbors.

Relations with the U.S.

14. (C) Traditionally, the bilateral relationship with the U.S. has been the exclusive domain of the FM and PM. How this will play out under Berisha-Meta remains to be seen. Former PM Pandeli Majko told PolOff that Berisha will likely seek ways to go around Meta in terms of contact with the USG, using emissaries from the Prime Minister's Office or other ministers to press Berisha's agenda and bypass Meta. Several observers suggested that Berisha could also try to install a loyalist in the Albanian Embassy in Washington in order to take his message directly to Washington.

Meet the New Minister

15. (C) Meta's re-emergence from the political wilderness as Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in a Berisha-led government was an outcome few expected from the June parliamentary elections. Meta's dramatic return comes after years of struggling to work his way back up the rungs of power after becoming Prime Minister in 1999 at only 30 years of age. Meta's comeback has been impressive, particularly after his ill-fated hunger strike against changes in the Electoral Code failed miserably last fall (reftel) and his LSI party managed to win only four seats in the most recent parliamentary elections. While Meta emerged weaker from the poorly planned strike, he quickly regrouped and cast himself (correctly it seems) as the kingmaker for the June 28 elections. With the four parliamentary seats LSI won in the elections, he was able to keep PM Sali Berisha's Democratic Party (DP) in power by forming a coalition with the DP, giving the DP-LSI coalition a ruling majority.

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16. (SBU) Meta broke from the SP and formed LSI in 2004 after falling out with then-SP Chairman and PM Fatos Nano, and from 2004 until now struggled to carve out a role for himself on the left. Although Meta and Nano have patched things up, Meta and current SP Chairman Edi Rama remain bitter rivals. Meta served as PM from 1999 to January 2002 when he was forced to resign after a power struggle with then Socialist Party (SP) Chairman Fatos Nano. During his two and a half years as PM, he advanced efforts to modernize the economy, privatize business, fight crime, and reform the judiciary and tax systems. He was also outspoken in his efforts to integrate Albania into the greater European community. In early 2001, when fighting involving an Albanian separatist movement erupted, he supported greater rights for the Albanian minority but condemned the rebels' violent tactics.

17. (SBU) Prior to his appointment as PM, Meta served as Deputy PM and Secretary of State for Integration at the MFA. From 1996 to 1997, he served as Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission on Foreign Affairs. He has also been an MP since 1992. In the early 1990s, Meta was one of the leaders of the student movement which brought about the end of Communist rule, and chaired the Albanian-Euro Socialist Youth Forum, a Socialist International member organization. From 1993 to 1996, he was the SP's Deputy Chairman for Foreign Affairs. Meta also has extensive business interests, is very wealthy and is widely held to be spectacularly corrupt. Meta was born in Skrapar, Albania on March 24, 1969 and studied at the University of Tirana where he received a Master's Degree in Economics. He speaks fluent English and Italian and is married to Monika Kryemadhe, with whom he has two daughters and a son. Kryemadhe is an accomplished politician herself, having served as a member of the Tirana city council. She ran for parliament in the June general election but failed to win a seat.

18. (C) Comment: Meta is no stranger to foreign affairs as his bio indicates, and he should have a short learning curve. His previous tenure at the MFA was marked by increased attempts at European integration and this theme will continue with issues such as visa liberalization. Two MFA officials

have told Post that they are pleased with his selection, with one noting that "there are much worse choices." Both sources suggested that staffing changes would be minimal in the MFA with the changeover, but said he will likely bring in several of his loyalists to serve as assistants. Meta can be combative at times, as shown by his initiation of a bench-clearing brawl on the floor of parliament in 2006 (he later expressed regret for the incident), but at the same time he can be a shrewdly pragmatic political operator. Meta will certainly use his time as FM and DPM to build up his image as a statesman to improve his political standing, with an eye on someday becoming PM again. While Meta will be quite different from former FM Lulzim Basha, we expect no real changes in the MFA's focus or direction.

WITHERS